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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM 1576
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INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN 7302
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 3618
RUEHKU/AMEMBASSY KUWAIT 1330
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0404
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0424
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 7983
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 2148
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000267

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SUBJECT: FORMER PRESIDENT CARTER'S VISIT TO DAMASCUS

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin for reasons 1.5 b and d.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Though Embassy Damascus provided little more than security and logistical support for former President Carter's April 18-19 trip to Damascus, the SARG seized on the visit to underscore the point that peace in the Middle East cannot be reached without engaging Syria. From our brief contacts with the Carter team, we believe Carter's primary agenda was fact finding, with a view to developing a mediation role between Israel and Hamas. End Summary

¶2. (SBU) President Carter's plane touched down at Damascus International Airport on April 18 and was met by VFM Miqdad. Originally conceived as an Elder's Mission to the Middle East that was to have included Mary Robinson and Kofi Annan, Carter's visit to Damascus ended up occurring under the auspices of the Carter Center. Those accompanying President Carter included: Mrs. Carter, Jeff Carter, Steve Solarz, Robert Pastor, Hrair Balian and Rick Jasculca.

¶3. (SBU) Embassy participation in the visit was confined to RSO/GSO support to the Secret Service's mission to protect the former president (armored vehicles, cellular phones, hotel reservations, etc.), issuance of Diplomatic Notes (requesting meeting with President Asad, Foreign Minister Muallim, visa issuance, support for Secret Service requirements and airplane landing clearances), and a briefing for Carter on arrival by the Charge. Carter's advance person, Kristi Sebestyen, requested the only other Embassy support which was that we provide her contact information to SARG protocol. Sebestyen planned and organized all visit specifics directly with the SARG.

¶4. (SBU) In advance of Carter's arrival, local media as well as pan-Arab media based in Syria were seized with the possibility of a Carter/Meshal meetings and refused to believe that the Embassy was not involved in all elements of his schedule, despite clear statements to the contrary from Washington.

DAY ONE - Lunch with Asads, Dinner with Hamas

¶5. (C) During the ride from the airport to the Four Seasons, Charge briefed President Carter and his team. For his part,

Carter was extremely focused on the Hamas portion of his visit, and on Syrian-Israeli relations. Carter said he planned to raise Human Rights cases with Bashar, but wanted Bashar to act on his pressure.

¶ 6. (C) Bashar and spouse Asma hosted the Carters to a two-on-two lunch at the trendy "Art house" restaurant the afternoon of their arrival. The rest of delegation had lunch with the MFA. After lunch President Bashar, FM Mualllem, and VFM Miqdad had a joint meeting with the delegation. One Embassy contact told us that the meeting seemed to lack substance and was largely protocolary. After 5:00 p.m. the first day (after a noon arrival), Carter's delegation spent hours with Hamas leader Khaled Meshal and other Hamas officials at a private house in the West Mezzeh district of Damascus. The delegation stayed for dinner and then another meeting between the two principals.

Day Two - Breakfast with Hamas

¶ 7. (SBU) The following morning on April 19 there was another meeting at 7:00 a.m. with Khaled Meshal before the delegation's scheduled departure for Riyadh.

¶ 8. (C) President Carter's departure was colored by the fact that his private jet suffered an unspecified mechanical failure. Bashar provided his own presidential jet to fly Carter and party to Riyadh. Given the sad state of Syrian-Saudi relations, Bashar likely saw the irony in his "gracious" provision of the Syrian official aircraft to ferry Carter to Riyadh. Security cooperation with the SARG was

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excellent and Secret Service left satisfied, according to all reports.

¶ 9. (C) Comment: During and after Carter's visit, pan-Arab and Western journalists paid scant attention to Carter's meetings with President Bashar and Mualllem, and focused reporting almost exclusively on the Carter-Meshal meetings. In contrast, Syrian media gave lengthy coverage to the Bashar and Mualllem meetings. Some rumors exist that Carter will return to Syria soon. Carter's staffer, Sebestyen, who remained behind discounted the rumor, but she also denied the existence of a meeting with Meshal almost up until the moment it happened.

CORBIN